

Introduction

During the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, employment support, and in certain cases, employment itself, was at a standstill. Providers stopped offering traditional in-person employment supports to mitigate the spread of the virus. Since providers were unable to provide in-person services during the pandemic, they used remote and virtual supports to meet the service needs of individuals. Almost immediately after health restrictions went into place, people began talking about how to use smart phone and tablet applications, remote communication tools, and smart home devices to continue providing support and connection while maintaining safe physical distancing.

Even before the pandemic, small pockets of providers began experimenting with remote supports. Such supports have shown promise as a way for individuals to be more independent at work, self-manage work tasks, reduce reliance on job coaching, and facilitate natural workplace relationships. State intellectual and/or developmental disabilities agencies were already beginning to expand support for technology. However, the use of technology was not widespread, and it was not an expected practice in the provision of employment and day services for people with disabilities.

As the United States charts a path forward during the COVID-19 pandemic, we have an opportunity to learn from the widespread adoption of remote services and supports during the pandemic. This brief describes the findings from a survey developed and implemented by the Association of Persons Supporting Employment (APSE) on how employment and day service providers used remote and virtual supports in 2020. This brief shares findings from the survey and offers a set of considerations to improve employment services, policies, and practices based on lessons learned.

Methods

APSE developed and implemented a survey to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on employment and day services providers. This survey was repeated quarterly, with adjustments to survey items based on emerging issues and concerns. APSE first administered the survey during the summer of 2020 and then again in the fall of 2020. During the winter of 2020–2021, APSE conducted a third round of data collection. This brief shares findings from the summer and fall 2020 data collection points. The Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) and APSE collaborated to analyze survey responses. For multiple-choice and scale responses, we analyzed response frequencies in SPSS. On open-ended survey items, the research team reviewed responses and coded them into overarching themes.

In 2020, 681 respondents completed the summer survey, and 459 respondents completed the fall survey. In both surveys, the most frequent type of respondent was middle management (supervisors, managers, or team leads). Other respondents included executive directors, chief operating officers, presidents, job developers, job coaches, and direct support staff.

Survey respondents from the summer 2020 survey represented all 50 states, while 41 states were represented in the fall 2020 survey. The top five states where responses came from in summer 2020 were Ohio, Arizona, California, New York, and Oregon. The top five states in fall 2020 were Illinois, Kentucky, Oregon, Iowa, and Ohio. In both surveys, nearly all respondents reported providing supported employment and job development services. When asked about membership in a wide variety of professional organizations, more than 50% of respondents to both the summer and fall surveys reported being members of APSE.



Findings

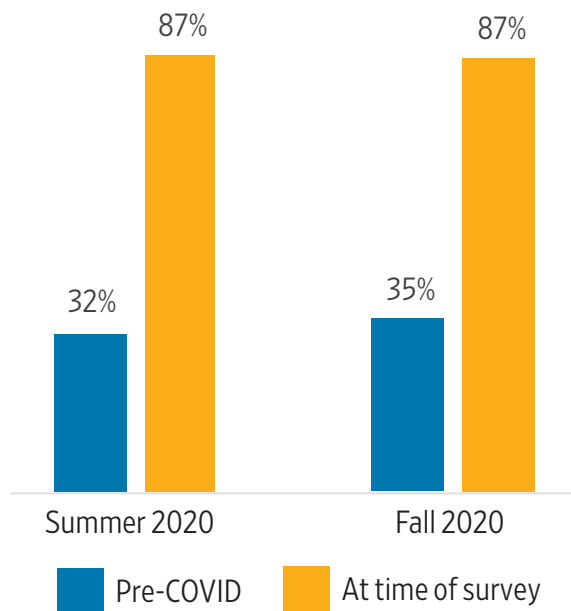
In this section, we share the results from providers as they pertain to the use of remote and virtual supports before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes:

- rate of remote and virtual supports use
- types of remote and virtual supports services
- how remote and virtual supports were used
- barriers to implementation providers encountered
- providers' likelihood of continuing to use remote and virtual supports tools beyond the pandemic

Providers' use of remote and virtual supports in 2020

APSE asked providers about their use of remote and virtual supports pre-COVID and then at the time of the survey. As Figure 1 shows, there was a sharp rise in the use of such supports, which remained consistent across the two survey times (summer 2020 and fall 2020).

FIGURE 1: PERCENT USING REMOTE & VIRTUAL SUPPORTS
(N = 428 summer, N = 273 fall)

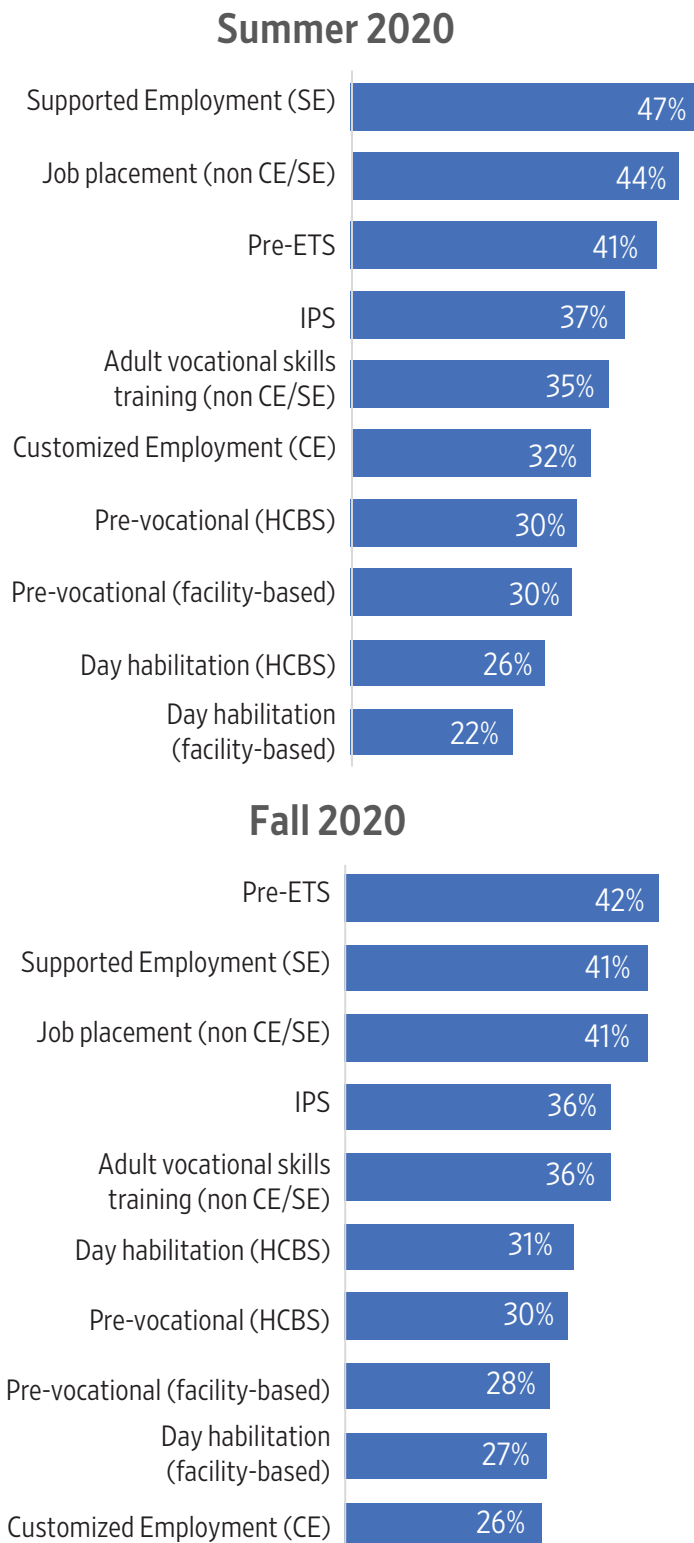


For what services did providers use remote and virtual supports?

Figure 2 shows that in the summer of 2020, providers used remote and virtual supports primarily for supported employment, job placement, and pre-employment transition services (pre-ETS). These three service types remained the most common in the fall of 2020

as well, although in a slightly different order with more remote and virtual support reported in pre-ETS. Notably, the rate of adoption of remote and virtual supports was generally higher for employment-related supports than for non-work services such as pre-vocational and day habilitation services.

FIGURE 2: REMOTE AND VIRTUAL BY SERVICE TYPE
(Percentage of providers that offer that service)



What innovative ways were remote and virtual supports implemented?

The survey included two open-ended questions about how providers were using remote and virtual supports. These were:

1. *“Please describe any unique or innovative ways that you have implemented remote/virtual supports.”*

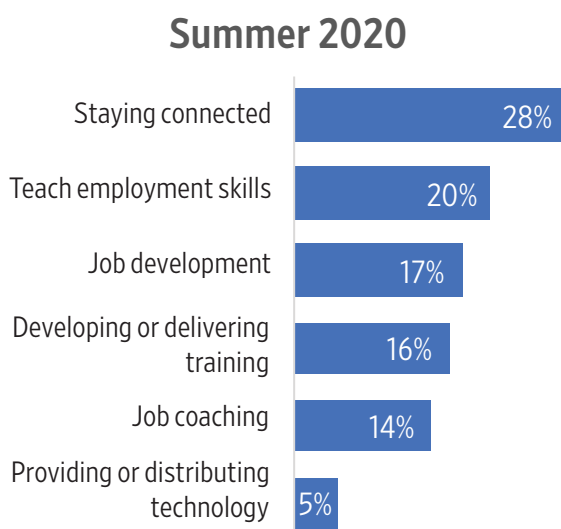
2. *“What has been the biggest barrier to success in implementing remote/virtual employment supports?”*

As noted in the methods, we coded responses for themes. Because not all survey respondents answered these questions, we have reported themes as a percentage of those who answered.

Providers described a variety of new uses of remote and virtual supports. As Figure 3 shows, the most common theme was “using virtual communication tools for employment support professionals to stay connected to individuals whom they support” and “facilitating connection between groups of individuals.” Respondents also used remote and virtual supports to build employment related skills, such as soft skills, interviewing skills, and social skills. Although less frequently, providers implemented remote and virtual job coaching and job development support (such as virtual discovery) or provided other types of training (besides for job skills). Finally, some providers also simply provided and distributed technology, such as giving out iPads.

FIGURE 3: INNOVATIVE WAYS OF USING REMOTE AND VIRTUAL SUPPORTS

(N = 218 responses to this question)



For job development - we have set up informational interviews on multiple virtual platforms. Encouraging and training employers to have interviews be virtual and share video portfolios of our job seekers.

We [used] Zoom to interact with our clients when the shutdowns started. It allowed for us to make contact and keep our clients involved.

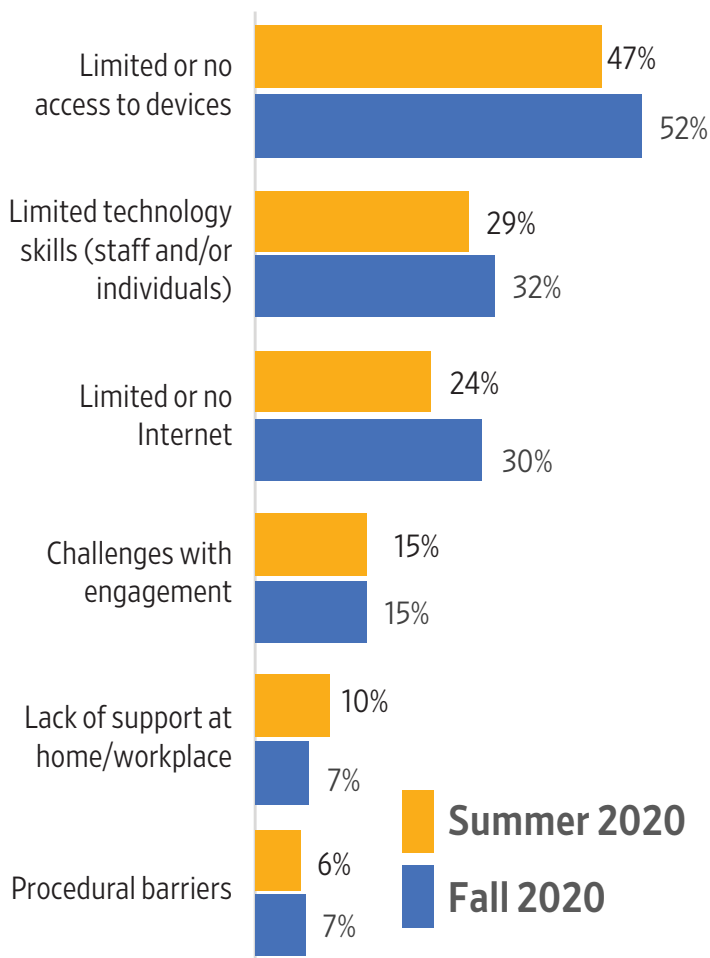
[We created a] virtual job shadow [program], skills training groups, a job coaching group, vocational counseling group, peer - to - peer support group, [and] job seeking skills groups.

What were the barriers to implementation of remote and virtual supports?

Providers responsively pivoted to remote and virtual supports during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, they encountered some barriers when doing so. As noted in Figure 4, the single biggest reported barrier in both the summer of 2020 and the fall of 2020 was “lack of access to the necessary devices”, such as computers, smartphones, or tablets. Furthermore, both individuals and staff struggled with limited skills as it related to remote and virtual platforms and the use of new technology. Some individuals, including some staff, lacked reliable access to the internet. Providers were also challenged to get and keep people engaged in remote and virtual supports or activities. Other, less common barriers included “lack of support at home or in the workplace to access the technology” and procedural barriers such as “difficulty with approval or reimbursement for remote services.”

FIGURE 4: BIGGEST BARRIERS TO REMOTE AND VIRTUAL SUPPORTS

(N= 350 Summer; 209 Fall)

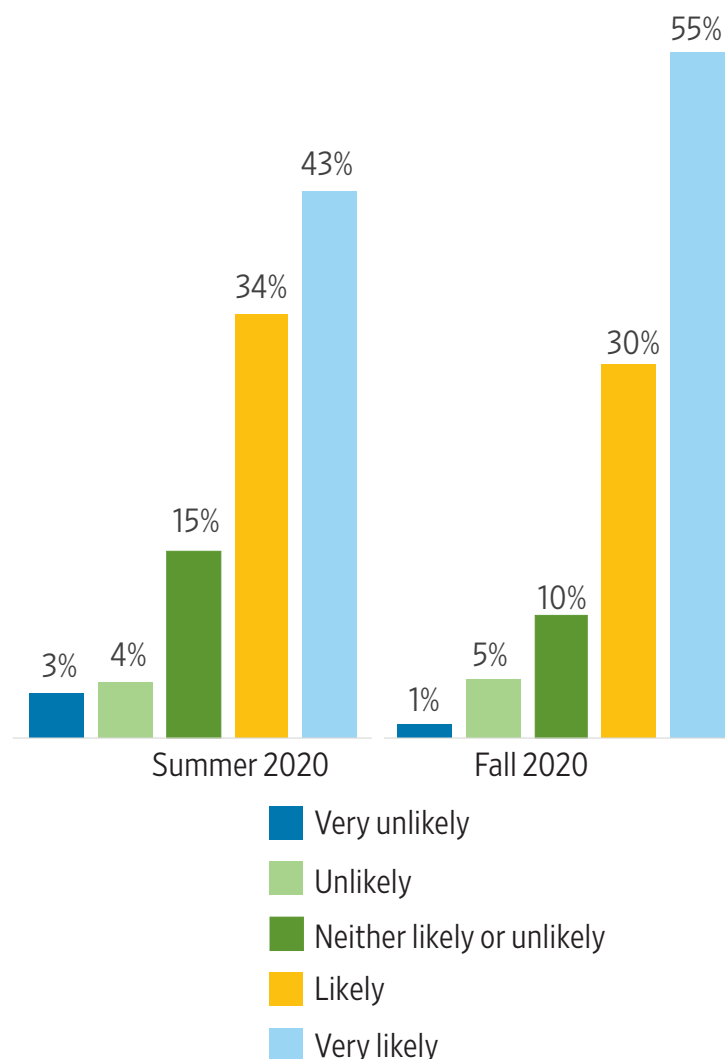


How likely are providers to continue to use remote and virtual supports after COVID-19?

The survey asked providers how likely they would be to continue to use remote and virtual supports once the COVID-19 pandemic ends. Out of the 401 respondents to this question in the summer 2020 survey, 34% believed they would be likely to continue to use such supports, with 43% responding that they would be very likely. In fall 2020, an even higher proportion of respondents (55%) picked the “very likely” response option. It is possible that during the time between surveys, providers began to feel more comfortable with using remote and virtual supports and began to see the value of such supports. See Figure 5.

FIGURE 5: PROVIDERS’ LIKELIHOOD TO USE REMOTE/ VIRTUAL SUPPORTS POST COVID-19

(N = 401; 236)



Recommendations

Providers across the US have shown tremendous resiliency during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the adoption of remote and virtual supports to provide services. In fact, findings show that it is likely that remote and virtual supports will continue to be a part of the service mix. Reflecting on providers' early adoption of technology during COVID-19 can inform future use of remote and virtual supports. Here we offer recommendations for direct support professionals, provider organizations, and state agencies for the continuation of effective use of remote and virtual supports.

Here are some recommendations for Direct Support Professionals (DSPs):

- **Use remote and virtual supports to get know the job seeker and their support networks.** Best practice encourages direct support professionals to ask job seekers to identify important members of their social network who can help to support employment goals. Remote and virtual engagement can not only make it easier to engage with individuals, but also provide a platform for including a wider circle of support.
- **Use remote and virtual supports to promote opportunities for job exploration.** DSPs can use live and recorded video to support individuals to expand their knowledge about the types of jobs available in their community. For example, virtual job shadowing may allow a job seeker to understand the roles, requirements, and job tasks necessary in certain positions without having to travel to the job site.
- **Fade in-person job supports.** Remote and virtual supports can be an efficient and cost-effective way to either supplement or replace in-person job coaching. Providing job coaching through videoconferencing and app-based prompts and resources can increase independence for the job seeker, decrease the need for formal supports, and create space for the provision of natural supports.
- **Provide training to job seekers on the use of remote and virtual supports.** One barrier noted was that individuals had limited technology skills necessary to engage in remote and virtual supports. DSPs should assess and grow simple technology skills as part of the employment supports process to enable ongoing success.

Here are some recommendations for provider organizations:

- **Provide ongoing training and technical assistance to staff.** A barrier encountered during the pandemic was lack of staff familiarity with new forms technology. There is a need for instruction on different types of technology, how to assess what technology to use, and how to support individuals in using technology.
- **Assess the need for devices and internet access.** Work with state agencies, such as the state developmental disabilities agencies, vocational rehabilitation, and assistive technology agencies to help individuals gain access to the types of technology that will allow them to successfully receive virtual and remote supports. Provide technology and internet access to staff.

Here are some recommendations for state agencies:

- **Ensure that state policy and practice incorporate the use of remote and virtual services and supports.** This may include ensuring service definitions have an option to use remote supports, determining appropriate reimbursement rates, defining units of service, and defining quality standards.
- **Determine how to support the cost of technology devices and internet access.** The largest barrier to remote and virtual supports reported in this survey was lack of access to technology; lack of access to the internet, especially in rural areas was also a considerable barrier. Providing funding to address these gaps can be an important role for state agencies to ensure equity in the availability of technology to receive support.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a massive increase in the use of technology for communication and support in all aspects of life. In addition, the ongoing use of remote and virtual supports for people with disabilities will clearly remain. Through an examination of lessons learned by employment support providers during the pandemic, we can identify ways to ensure that remote and virtual supports are used effectively to support employment outcomes for those seeking integrated employment for years to come.



Learn more about remote and virtual supports and technology from the ICI!



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For more information

Jaimie Timmons
jaimie.timmons@umb.edu
 Institute for Community Inclusion

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www.ThinkWork.org/rrtc
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About APSE

The Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE) is the only national membership organization focused exclusively on Employment First to facilitate the full inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace and community.

APSE members recognize that everyone has abilities to contribute and their work should be recognized and rewarded with fair pay, creating inclusive workplaces. Employment enriches and adds meaning to every life, and workplaces and communities are enhanced when they embrace differences.